

Central Intelligence Agency

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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Possible Chinese Motives for the Overtures to Gorbachev

Summary

Since the December 1984 visit of First Deputy Premier Arkhipov, Beijing has signaled its interest in improving relations on a broad front with Moscow. Chernenko's death and the rapid rise of Gorbachev have prompted the most dramatic gestures to date. The fact that the Chinese have made such gestures without a corresponding indication that Moscow is prepared to be flexible on China's key security concerns raises questions about Beijing's motives. Although Beijing seems most concerned about improving the atmospherics of the relationship, the possibility now exists that China may moderate its demands on the security issues and that progress will be made on political issues, including the formal restoration of party-to-party ties. [redacted]

This memorandum attempts to put Beijing's recent gestures in perspective, to examine an array of possible motives and to point up some of the potential risks in China's relations with regional neighbors, the West and the United States. We speculate that China's gestures may be the result of a combination of factors, including pressure from conservative opponents who are concerned about the

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ideological correctness of Deng's economic and bureaucratic reforms and advocate a more normal relationship with Moscow. Whether Deng can initially accommodate and then brake these pressures--as he has in the past--is a key uncertainty. Moreover, if China's gestures are the product of intensified internal debate rather than merely an effort, for example, to seek more maneuvering room in the triangle, then we would expect the months leading up to the major party conference in September to be characterized by increased wrangling on domestic and foreign issues as each side maneuvers for position.

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This memorandum is tentative and speculative because we as yet lack sufficient intelligence on Beijing's motives and perceived options. We believe, however, Beijing will continuously evaluate and reevaluate its relations with Moscow as Gorbachev settles in. These reevaluations will be heavily influenced by the reactions of the United States and Japan in particular. In 1982, the Chinese moved quickly to assure Washington and Tokyo that they were not embarked on a fundamental policy alteration. The manner in which Beijing characterizes its recent gestures toward the Soviets to the United States and Japan should provide a gauge for the seriousness of the Chinese effort and some indications of the degree to which Washington can influence Beijing's course.

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What's New?

Since Chernenko's death, China has greatly improved the atmospherics of Sino-Soviet relations and the Soviets have been responsive:

- China's party chief, General Secretary Hu Yaobang sent "hearty congratulations" to his Soviet counterpart.
- Beijing referred to the USSR as "socialist" for the first time since 1967.
- National People's Congress Chairman Peng Zhen referred to Gorbachev as "comrade" in extending congratulations to him.
- A Foreign Ministry spokesman broke precedent by congratulating the new Soviet leader on his party promotion. But no party-to-party message was sent.

- Vice Premier Li Peng repeated in Moscow earlier Chinese statements that it "does not establish strategic relations with other countries" in an apparent effort to portray China's expanding ties with the United States in a non-threatening manner.
- Gorbachev received a senior Chinese official after Chernenko's funeral, the first such meeting with a top Soviet official since the 1960s. Chernenko did not grant a private meeting to a higher ranking Chinese delegate at Andropov's funeral last year.

Even before Chernenko's passing, the Chinese were sending strong indications of a desire for better relations with the USSR. Beijing went to extraordinary lengths to insure the success of last December's visit to China by First Deputy Premier Ivan Arkhipov:

- The Chinese toned down and in some cases avoided criticism of the Soviet role in Afghanistan and Indochina, long the subject of Chinese accusations of "hegemony."
- During his visit, Beijing signed a significantly expanded trade agreement plus new agreements on economic cooperation and exchanges in culture and science and technology.
- Arkhipov was received by senior Chinese officials despite the lack of a protocol requirement to do so. Both side used party appellations to refer to the officials in their media accounts for the first time since the 1960s.
- Beijing has avoided a showy display of force against Vietnam during the most intense and successful dry season offensive yet against Chinese-supported Cambodian resistance forces. Although the Chinese have quietly applied considerable force against Vietnam at times this dry season, it appears to be avoiding the sort of conspicuous action that would force Moscow to react publicly against China in support of Vietnam.

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What are Beijing's Motives?

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It is our

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judgment based on previous Chinese thinking and our understanding of the political situation that the following factors in some combination influenced Beijing's thinking. [redacted]

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We believe a desire to get off to a positive start with the **new Gorbachev administration** is one factor. The Chinese appear to be under no illusions about the prospects for a sudden change in the Soviet security posture toward China. After all, they have firsthand experience with the problems of an aging politburo and ossified bureaucracy. [redacted]

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But we believe the Chinese see the chance of flexibility under Gorbachev as worth the risks of its recent gestures. Chinese-controlled Hong Kong media are portraying Gorbachev as someone open to new ideas and better relations, and they claim to see in his speeches something of their own reformist character. They may believe their moves could provide Gorbachev ammunition to bring his politburo colleagues along in improving relations at some point. [redacted]

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In any case, the Chinese have always placed unusual emphasis on the opportunities presented by leadership transitions--despite their ideological stress on the importance of systems over individuals. When Khrushchev fell during an intense phase of Sino-Soviet polemics, for example, Premier Zhou Enlai travelled to Moscow to explore for new opportunities to ease the split. [redacted]

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Just as important in Chinese thinking, we believe, is Beijing's perception of an opportunity to strengthen itself vis-a-vis Washington and Moscow in the "**strategic triangle**." China is sensitive about its dependence on the United States as a strategic counterweight to the Soviet Union and recognizes it is the weakest of the three parties. A more normal relationship with Moscow improves its leverage in both capitals. We believe China's treatment of Arkhipov was aimed at spurring Washington to be more forthcoming on technology transfer and to remind the United States not to take Beijing for granted as bilateral security cooperation expands. [redacted]

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The more assertive United States posture toward the Soviet Union in recent years has, in Beijing's view, blunted Soviet expansionism, and their own expanding political and military ties with the United States may have given Beijing confidence that it can approach the Soviets from a position of relative strength. Beijing may also calculate that Moscow may feel pressed enough around the world to be willing to discuss some of China's security concerns. [redacted]

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Public overtures to Moscow also serve wider foreign policy concerns. China stresses that it has an "independent foreign policy," and is sensitive to past criticism in the third world that it is in fact allied with the United States. We believe Beijing sees such actions as the Arkhipov visit as increasing its credibility as an independent power and as enhancing its ability to compete with Moscow in the third world. []

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The beginning of **strategic arms** discussions in Geneva and the possibility of measureable improvement in US-Soviet relations may also be a factor in Beijing's thinking. The Chinese have long feared the United States and USSR might reach agreements that would ignore or harm Chinese interests. []

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[] In the past, the Chinese have voiced their concern that an agreement on SS-20s might permit the Soviets to shift additional missiles to east of the Urals. More recently, the Strategic Defense Initiative has raised fears that the United States and USSR may terminate the ABM treaty and thus permit Moscow to expand its strategic defenses. In Beijing's view, this could neutralize its limited nuclear deterrent against the Soviets. []

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We believe Beijing may also be concerned that the Gorbachev succession will lead to improved US-Soviet relations independent of progress on arms talks. The Chinese may be concerned that their position in the triangle will deteriorate significantly unless their relations with Moscow also improve. []

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As logical as these factors are, we believe they do not fully explain the Chinese overture. We speculate that Deng Xiaoping, who maintains tight control over Chinese foreign policy, may be playing to a domestic audience as well as an international one. We have no direct evidence that the Gorbachev overtures are a response to **domestic politics**, but a circumstantial case can be made. []

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Deng is actively pushing forward a sweeping economic reform program that threatens a wide-range of vested interests in the party and government. Deng has made clear that these reforms, which require close ties to the West, are his number one priority. The program has caused considerable concern, not only about the open door to the West and the social costs of the program, but about its ideological correctness as well. []

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Our reading of the Chinese media [] leads us to conclude that these concerns may have grown in recent months. The Deng controlled media have devoted considerable attention to justifying the ideological correctness of the reforms, and the reformers have recently launched a

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crackdown on corruption associated with the program. []

We believe that most Chinese leaders are satisfied with Deng's program, but there are a number of senior figures who are disturbed by aspects of it. Politburo members Chen Yun and Peng Zhen are most often identified by Chinese as the leading advocates of a more cautious approach to reform, including greater reliance on Soviet-style planning and a more limited role for Western investment. They do not seem to have as broad a network of supporters in the party and government as Deng but we believe they may be spokesmen for all who have some complaint about the program. In any case, they are powerful men whose interests Deng must accommodate at critical junctures. []

We believe Deng is approaching another one of these junctures. A major party meeting is planned for September at which we believe Deng will attempt to strengthen the reform group, weaken his critics--including Chen and Peng--and nail down the final planks of his reform program. We believe the preliminary meetings for the September conclave are underway, and if past practice is a guide, Deng will have to compromise in some areas to build the leadership consensus he need to achieve his primary goals. []

We speculate that although Deng remains one of the strongest critics of the Soviet Union in the leadership, he may have authorized the gestures to Gorbachev as a way to mollify those in the leadership like Chen and Peng who have raised doubts about the program and have voiced concern about a lack of balance in China's relations with the United States and the Soviet Union.

We also speculate that Deng may see another advantage in making an overture to Moscow at this time. If the Soviets do not respond, Peng and Chen are undercut, leaving Deng in a stronger position to push forward both his domestic and foreign policies. The clear risks in this course for Deng may be reduced by his control over the foreign policy bureaucracy. Presumably Deng will attempt to retain control over determining what constitutes an adequate reponse. []

The Costs to Beijing.

A gesture to the Soviets here or there could be relatively cost free, but the concerted Chinese effort of the past few months, culminating in the recent spate of signals to Gorbachev, could exact a price internationally, if viewed in their most

negative light. China's delayed and mild criticism of the Soviet role in Afghanistan and Indochina has already produced strains in relations with Pakistan and the ASEAN states. []

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In the case of Southeast Asia, the Gorbachev overtures will raise further doubts in ASEAN about China's commitment to the Cambodian resistance and to Thailand's defense against Vietnam. This may strengthen the position of those in the Thai government who are suspicious of Chinese motives or favor a more flexible policy toward Vietnam. For the moment, China continues to supply the Khmer resistance and has offered to give military hardware to Thailand. If China continues to play down its role as a regional counterweight against Hanoi, however, by avoiding showy military action on the China-Vietnam border, Bangkok could become more inclined to accept a political solution in Cambodia on terms favorable to Hanoi. []

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In attempting to build leverage in Washington, Beijing runs the risk of undercutting its efforts to obtain US technology, weapons, and investment. By stressing China's lack of strategic relations with the United States, Beijing could also find itself cut off from consultations involving Vietnam, Pakistan, or other areas where common strategic interests have been identified in the past. []

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The Chinese leadership will also have to calculate that Taiwan's voice in the United States will be greatly enhanced if Beijing continues movement toward Moscow. New strains in this area could quickly undermine the perception of stronger US-China relations that Beijing is capitalizing on in its gestures to the Soviets. []

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Further moves toward the Soviets could have an impact in Japan, where management of the Soviet threat has long depended in part on an independent and preferably pro-West China tying down Soviet forces. If China permits the perception of improving relations with the USSR to grow, it will stimulate Japanese anxiety about a possible increase in the threat from the Soviet Union. This would be likely to provoke requests for reassurances regarding the strength of the US security guarantee and could prompt realignments in Japanese domestic politics that would permit a more rapid military buildup. Viewed from the perspective of China's experience in World War II, they would be seen as pressures for a resurgence of Japanese militarism. []

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If our speculation about the role of internal politics is correct, Deng also could face major problems if the Soviets respond with a serious offer to accommodate one of China's security concerns, such as visibly reducing support for Vietnam

or altering its forces on the Sino-Soviet border. Such a move could easily spark sharp debate in the leadership. Forging a consensus on how to respond in such a case without further damaging relations with Washington and equities in Southeast Asia would be very difficult. []

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What Next?

The current swing in the Chinese pendulum merits careful observation, particularly because the secrecy of the Chinese system and the relatively short track record of the reformers provide few reliable indicators of their intentions. We believe the essence of China's strategic view remains unchanged. As Beijing assesses the world and its position, it:

- Continues to believe the only serious external threat to China comes from the Soviet Union.
- Remains committed to economic modernization, which means it requires trade, technology, and investment from the West, and particularly the United States. The USSR cannot do this for China.
- Needs a US counterweight; a preoccupied Soviet Union is less threatening to China.
- Recognizes its armed forces cannot modernize fast enough to keep pace with Soviet force improvements and need a military tie with the US. []

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From the Soviet perspective as well, there are factors that place real limits on how far and how fast the relationship can progress:

- China and the Soviet Union might eventually develop party relations patterned on the Yugoslav model, but the Soviet demands on members of its "socialist" community would be very hard for China to accept.
- The Soviets give no sign of a willingness to improve their relations with China at the expense of their ties with Afghanistan, Vietnam, or Mongolia.
- Moscow's calculations of its Asian military requirements are complicated by measures by the United States and its allies to strengthen their posture in East Asia and the Western Pacific. []

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We believe Deng recognizes the potential costs to China, and he may calculate that he can manage them through private assurances and continued close ties with Washington and the West in general. In a sense, the Chinese have been playing this game since 1979 when they started talks with Moscow, and since they began to speak in terms of "an independent foreign policy" in 1981-82. Deng and others moved quickly in 1979 and 1982 to

reassure United States officials that little had changed after Beijing opened political talks with Moscow. []

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By going as far as it has, however, Beijing may be overplaying its hand and underestimating the potential reaction. The greetings to Gorbachev raise questions about what, if any, limits the "three obstacles" (Soviet troops on China's border, aid to Vietnam, and presence in Afghanistan) place on Sino-Soviet relations. []

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Deng's need to get his political reform proposals through important party meetings this summer and fall may cause the reformers to continue to finesse the question of improving relations with Moscow and delay a serious reexamination of the present course. An increasing requirement to play to an anti-Western, anti-US gallery could keep the option of a balancing relationship with the Soviet Union very much alive. []

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We believe the next few weeks will provide some important clues for determining just how far Beijing is willing to go. We expect China will want to offer some explanation of its actions to foreigners in general and the United States officials in particular. The level at which these assurances are offered, as well as their content and tone will be significant. The next round of Sino-Soviet talks is scheduled for April, and China's public treatment of these discussions as well as how they are portrayed to us privately should also provide important clues. Finally, propaganda treatment of the three obstacles may provide some indication of whether Deng and company intend to use a lack of progress on security issues with Moscow to provide a brake on the relationship. []

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